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ABSTRACT

The Peer Helper Program was administered by Substance Prevention, Abuse Rehabilitation, and Knowledge (SPARK). Since its beginning in 1971, SPARK has addressed issues such as drug use, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and other forms of violence. The Peer Helper Program was designed to train students in the skills required to assist peers who were identified as "high risk." The findings in this report are based on information obtained from program materials and interviews conducted at the participating schools during the 1993-94 school year. The role of the peer helper student is not that of a counselor, but an advocate for school-based services provided by the program. Students take part in a broad range of activities which include conflict mediation, regular classroom presentations, "rap" groups, tutoring, new student orientation, and community service. Peer helpers are taught a one-year curriculum in a class that meets for one period a day, five days a week. Participants' perceptions of the program were generally positive: both program staff and peer helpers reported that participating students gained knowledge and skills; and students who sought program services reported being helped. For the most part, however, it appeared that the peer helpers benefited the most, a finding that is consistent with other studies on peer helping. A majority of students seeking help were not primarily concerned with "high profile" issues, but with more ordinary life situations such as after-school jobs and families. Recommendations concerning the future of the program are also included. (BF)

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ED 383 945

OER Report

SPARK PEER HELPER PROGRAM
1993-94

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Peer Helper Program is administered by Substance Prevention, Abuse Rehabilitation, and Knowledge (SPARK), a program established in 1971 to deal with what was identified as a drug emergency in the New York City public schools. Since that time the Board of Education has operated school-based programs in all 32 public school districts and in 108 high schools to provide students with a variety of intervention and prevention strategies related to alcohol and drug abuse, and in recent years, to address as well issues related to teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and other forms of violence. In 1992-93 the United States Department of Education awarded SPARK a two-year grant to implement a Peer Helper Program in 12 high schools throughout the city. The program is designed to train students in the skills required to assist peers who are identified as "high risk."

The findings presented in this report are based on information obtained from program materials and interviews conducted in the course of site visits to the six schools where the program was in operation during the 1993-94 school year.

The role of the peer helper student, who works under the supervision of full-time peer facilitator, is not that of a counselor, but an advocate for school-based services provided by the program. Accordingly, students take part in a broad range of SPARK activities which include conflict mediation, regular classroom presentations on a variety of topics, "rap" groups, tutoring, staffing SPARK information booths, publication of a newsletter, new student orientation, and community service.

The key variables affecting the implementation of the program at the schools visited were the nature of the student population and the problems they faced, the helping philosophy of the peer facilitator, and the overall role of SPARK within the context of other support services available to students.

Between 30 and 60 students at each of the schools visited have been trained or are being trained to be peer helpers. They are taught a one-year curriculum in a class that meets for one period a day, five days a week. The training is designed to improve their communication skills, such as active listening, increase their knowledge of issues related to substance abuse, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and sexual and other forms of violence, and to heighten their familiarity with school and community resources which provide assistance in dealing with these and other problems.

While the program lacked high visibility among students and school staff, participants' perceptions of the program were generally positive: both program staff and peer helpers reported

that participating students gained knowledge and skills; and students who sought program services reported being helped. For the most part, however, it appeared that the peer helpers benefitted the most, a finding that is consistent with other studies on peer helping.

Importantly, too, the majority of students seeking help were not primarily concerned with "high profile" issues, but with more ordinary life situations having to do with school, after-school jobs, and relationships with friends and families.

Most users of the Peer Helper Training Manual considered it useful, but limited largely because it was outdated and not sufficiently advanced.

Based on the findings presented here and elsewhere in this report the following recommendations are made:

- There is a need to increase the program's visibility among both students who might avail themselves of its services, and school staff who may not recognize the unique opportunities for help it provides; staff also need to be better informed about the nature of the program and how it differs from other SPARK services, and receive assurances that peer helpers do not provide inappropriate assistance to other students. Currently, the SPARK Staff Development Unit has prepared modules that can be delivered by peer facilitators, and other SPARK staff at school sites, to better explain program services.

- Since the role of helping clearly affords students important opportunities for personal growth and development, this program targets as peer helpers students who demonstrate good interpersonal skills and responsible behaviors because it expands services to other students who are at-risk. The identification of such at-risk students for the purpose of bringing them into contact with SPARK personnel and other services is important and perhaps this notion needs to be more clearly defined for some school staff.

- Since students who use program services typically seek help with everyday problems encountered at home and at school, training for the peer helpers should equip them to deal with such "lower profile", but to adolescents obviously important, issues.

- The Peer Helper Training Manual, Volume I, currently used by staff, is a draft copy which was field tested and reviewed by a committee of volunteer peer facilitators and revised and rewritten by the coordinator of the Peer Helper Program. The new material contains more up-to-date and demonstrated approaches to adolescent issues about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; issues of personal growth and development; personal health; and violence prevention. This new volume should be implemented as soon as possible.

- The program at six sites was discontinued for reasons ranging from staff resignation and reassignment to lack of support from the principal for a programmed course for credit. Program staff need to examine the issues that precluded the program's continued implementation in six high schools during the 1993-94 school year, and reevaluate the criteria used for selecting schools or ways of helping schools deal with factors that impede the program's implementation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

PROGRAM BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE

The Peer Helper Program is administered by Substance Prevention, Abuse Rehabilitation, and Knowledge (SPARK), a program established in 1971 to deal with what was identified as a drug emergency in the New York City public schools. Since that time, the Board of Education has operated school-based programs in all 32 public school districts and in 108 high schools in order to provide students with a variety of intervention and prevention strategies related to alcohol and drug abuse. In recent years, issues related to teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and other forms of violence have been addressed as well.

In 1992-93 the United States Department of Education awarded SPARK a two-year grant to implement a Peer Helper Program in 12 high schools throughout the city. During the 1993-94 school year the program functioned in six schools: Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx; Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn; the High School of Art and Design and Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan; Martin Van Buren High School in Queens; and Curtis High School in Staten Island. Staff turnover and what were described by a SPARK administrator as "program problems," have put the program on hold in the remaining schools.

The Peer Helper Program is designed to train students in skills required to assist peers who are identified as "high risk." The role of the peer helper student, who works under the

supervision of the full-time peer facilitator, is not that of a counselor, but of an advocate for school-based services provided by the program.

The peer helper is a member of the SPARK team, which includes a full-time prevention specialist and full-time intervention specialist, and a peer facilitator. An alumni peer helper, a recent high school graduate currently attending college, who has successfully completed the one-year training, may also be part of the team.

The prevention specialist leads workshops on substance abuse, sexuality, violence and related issues; identifies and refers students who are "at risk"; provides short-term supportive counseling; organizes educational events; and acts as an information resource for the school. The intervention specialist organizes and facilitates developmental groups, counsels students, offers referral and follow-up services, and confers with faculty and school administrators. The peer facilitator selects and trains students for peer helping and peer leadership responsibilities, supervises student peer helpers, regularly reviews their assignments, and assists them in designing and implementing peer projects to improve the school and the community. The alumni peer helper, employed by SPARK on a part-time basis, establishes supportive relationships with team members, and organizes program-related service and educational activities.

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

Recognizing that several of the Peer Helper Program's evaluation objectives were met in the first year of implementation, SPARK administrators requested that the Office of Educational Research (OER) focus this year's evaluation on ways in which gains made in Year One can be sustained. Accordingly, the following objectives were identified in relation to 1993-94 participants:

- Peer helper recruitment. At the conclusion of the recruiting phase, the peer facilitators will have successfully identified peer helpers and enrolled them in the program;
- Peer helper training. At the conclusion of the training phase, participating students will have improved their communication and related skills, and increased their knowledge of issues related to substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, sexual and other forms of abuse, and violence, as well as their familiarity with school and community resources which provide assistance in dealing with these and other problems affecting adolescents; and
- Perception of the program as a resource. Members of the school community, including administrators, guidance staff and students, will demonstrate a recognition of the Peer Helper Program as an effective resource.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The OER evaluator reviewed program materials, including the Peer Helper Training Manual, and other studies related to peer helping; attended the third annual Peer Helper Conference sponsored by the SPARK Manhattan office; and made site visits to the six schools where the Peer Helper Program was in place and functioning effectively. During these visits, the evaluator interviewed a total of five peer facilitators, five prevention

specialists, five intervention specialists, eight school administrators and guidance staff, and 47 students (individually or in groups) who had been trained or were being trained to be peer helpers. Informal group interviews were also conducted with 40 other students selected at random at the time of the visit.

SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

This report examines the second year of operation of the Peer Helper Program in the six schools where it was in operation during the 1993-94 school year. Chapter I describes the background and structure of the program, its objectives, and the evaluation methodology used in this study. Chapter II discusses issues related to peer helping. Chapter III focuses on the implementation of the program--the recruitment, selection, training, and activities of the peer helpers--and on the perceptions of program staff, school administrators and guidance personnel, participating students, and other students. Chapter IV offers conclusions and recommendations.

II. ISSUES RELATED TO PEER HELPING

Over the last decade and a half, peer counseling/helping in public school settings has attracted growing interest throughout the country. This interest stems in large part from the recognition that across the social spectrum the escalation of violence, sexual harassment and abuse in families, social situations, and the workplace, and the widespread misuse of drugs and alcohol are having a destructive impact on adolescents, and that these young people are frequently too isolated, afraid, distrustful or embarrassed to seek help from adults--especially those viewed as authority figures. Moreover, many adolescents--who may only be experiencing the more typical difficulties of everyday life--cannot ask for help from the very adults in their lives to whom they should be able to turn: parents, teachers, guidance counselors, therapists, and members of the clergy.

The rationale for peer helping is that adolescents with appropriate training can help other young people because, by virtue of their similar life circumstances, they are more likely than adults to be--and to be perceived as being--understanding, sympathetic, and nonjudgmental.

There is another, usually unspoken, rationale for peer helping, and that is economics. Since resources available for public education are dwindling while the need to address issues which have an enormous impact on student learning is more and more pressing, it is cost effective to enlist students themselves

as auxiliary providers of support services in appropriate situations and with adequate supervision.

Those who are critical of peer helping argue that those adolescents who are most in need are least likely to turn to any officially designated "helpers," regardless of their age. Moreover, while peers may be perceived as more likely to be understanding and capable of giving emotional support, they cannot handle situations requiring the expertise of a professionally trained adult. There is also concern that peer helpers may inadvertently do harm--e.g., by giving "bad" advice or failing to recognize situations that require immediate, professional intervention.

Although there is a growing body of literature on peer helping, there is as yet not much quantitative data regarding its effectiveness. Much of the research tends to focus on the perceptions of adults who train peer helpers and on the peer helpers themselves, rather than on those who seek help. Nor is much data available comparing adolescents who were helped by peers, those who were helped by adult school counselors, and those who do not seek help at all. Further, there is little longitudinal data showing how young people who received help from peer helpers have fared subsequently.

Following are examples of recent findings related to peer helping that have appeared in recent education journals and papers presented at professional conferences that are consistent with findings that have been reported during the last 15 years.

- One hundred and fifty-nine students at a Michigan high school who had met with a peer counselor reported being "slightly satisfied" with the services. The students who were satisfied said they had received empathy and understanding.

- A majority of 303 students (out of a total school population of 376) at a high school in Oklahoma said they thought peer helpers in the school were "effective" or "somewhat effective" and that they would consider sharing a problem with a peer counselor/ helper.

- A peer assistance program for teenage substance abusers in Florida conducted pre- and post-tests to measure how the program had influenced attitudes toward substance abuse. The post-inventory results showed that while a high number of teenagers chose to be drug-free at the conclusion of the project, it was the peer interviewers who benefited by their participation in the helping relationship.

- The results of a Florida intervention program to reduce absences, stimulate responsibility for assignments, and increase participation in extracurricular activities among disengaged ninth grade students by using eleventh grade students as role models and peer mentors showed improved attendance and grades for 12 or the 18 targeted freshmen after three months, and improved grades among the student mentors.

The evidence from these and similar studies point to the following conclusions: students who have gone to peer helpers report being helped, although for the most part not dramatically so; peer helping tends to be most clearly helpful for the peer helpers; and peer helping is not detrimental to those it seeks to help.

III. IMPLEMENTATION

DESCRIPTION

Peer Helper Activities

In accordance with a mandate issued in November 1993, peer helpers do not do one-on-one counseling. Instead, they take part in a broad range of SPARK activities which include conflict mediation, regular classroom presentations on various topics, "rap" groups, tutoring, staffing SPARK information booths, publication of a newsletter, new student orientation, and various community service activities directed at reinforcing the program's philosophy of helping (e.g., one SPARK program puts on an annual holiday program for residents of a homeless shelter in Harlem; another runs an annual clothing drive for poor people).

In one school, the peer helpers are regarded by the SPARK staff as "our eyes and ears"--i.e., they are expected to function as an early warning system to let staff members know about students who may be experiencing problems.

Program Operation

SPARK staff estimates of the number of students who came in to the SPARK office for help varied considerably in the six schools: the peer facilitator at a school whose student population is under 2,000 estimated that 150 students come in each term; the peer facilitator at a school with a student population of 3,000 estimated that 100 students seek help annually. The great majority of students seen by SPARK staff were referred by a guidance counselor, teacher, friend, or peer

helper. Typically, a guidance counselor informed one member of the SPARK team that a particular student was having difficulties or causing problems for others. Then, either that team member or another, depending on various factors (including the gender of the student, the nature of the problem, and the individual team member's work load), asked the student to come in. Although students are not required to comply with such requests from the SPARK office, most availed themselves of the help offered. Confidentiality is assured to students who make use of SPARK services, except when child abuse, homicide or suicide is involved; in these cases, it is mandated that the appropriate authorities be informed.

The Peer Helper Program at each of the six schools visited was similar in some respects and different in others. The key variables affecting how it was implemented were the nature of the student population and the kinds of problems students faced, the helping philosophy of the peer facilitator, and the overall role of SPARK within the context of other support services available to students.

At one school, where students felt a keen sense of academic and social pressure, the SPARK office functioned as a place where students can "just hang out." At another school, where 70 percent of the students speak a first language other than English, the nature of the pressure was very different. There, students came for help with everything from filling out a college application to learning the polite way to say certain things in

order to avoid unintentionally insulting their new classmates and teachers. The role of the peer helper varied accordingly.

In one school the SPARK office was located physically within the guidance department. At the other end of the continuum was the school where the SPARK staff "bend over backwards," as one prevention specialist put it, "to keep our distance."

At some schools there was a discernible therapeutic "tilt" to the Peer Helper Program, and students trained to be peer helpers were encouraged to become empathetic and insightful, with the SPARK staff serving as role models. At other schools, the program was more activity- and information-oriented.

In five of the schools students received credit toward graduation for electing to take the Peer Helper Program course. In one school, where the program was viewed as an extracurricular activity, the peer helpers met after school and did not get credit for participating.

What the programs in all schools seemed to have in common, however, was a commitment on the part of the SPARK team to create an environment--of which the peer helpers were an integral part--where students felt they could ask for, and in fact got, help with a wide variety of problems.

Another characteristic that the programs shared was the collaboration among the members of the SPARK team; while there was a formal division of labor, in practice they all provided instruction, offered counseling, served as sources of information, and consulted with school staff. Accordingly, the

intervention specialists and prevention specialists actively helped to recruit, train, and supervise the peer helpers.

Recruitment and Selection

Students were recruited to be peer helpers in various ways. The prevention specialists, who taught two five-day curricula--one on drug awareness and the other on HIV/AIDS--designed to reach every student in the school early in their school experience, were the most visible "public relations" members of the SPARK team. It is through these specialists that most students were introduced to SPARK and the Peer Helper Program.

At one school the intervention specialist led informal lunchtime "rap" groups open to any student in the school who wanted to participate. "They're important for recruitment," this intervention specialist said. At another school the SPARK staff relied on student nominations as their "first source," followed by recommendations from staff and peer helpers. One peer facilitator said, "I beat the bushes." Another reported soliciting referrals from teachers, guidance counselors, and students already in the program. A third facilitator said, "I used to ask teachers. Then I realized I was getting the goody-goodies," pointing to a belief that students who themselves have had problems are perhaps in a better position to understand the problems of other students than those who have not.

Schools also mounted advertising campaigns to recruit student helpers.

Among the criteria used in selecting the peer helpers according to the peer facilitators were the following: good daily school attendance, passing grades in every subject, an interest in helping others, and "just wanting to be part of the program."

"We screen out students with cutting problems and drug problems," an intervention specialist said. "They couldn't function as role models. And I screen out the ones who don't have problems. They just want to give advice."

"I look for the ability to communicate, to listen," said a peer facilitator, who encouraged students considered unsuitable as peer helpers to participate in other SPARK activities.

One peer facilitator said, "I look for kids who reach out to other kids, who go out of their way for someone else." Another explained, "I don't turn any kids away. I think that any kid can benefit and any kid can help."

Training

Between 30 and 40 students at each of the schools visited had been trained or were being trained to be peer helpers. The curriculum was taught during the course of one year in a class that met for one period a day, five days a week. It was designed to improve students' communication skills, such as active listening, to increase their knowledge of issues related to substance abuse, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, sexual and other forms of violence, and to familiarize them with school and community resources which provide assistance in dealing with these and other problems.

It may be worth noting that the majority of students at all of the schools visited were not concerned primarily with these "high profile" issues, but with more ordinary life problems having to do with school, after-school jobs, and relationships with friends and families. One consequence of the training was that in addition to learning how to talk about their personal feelings and how to listen attentively to other people without being judgmental or giving advice, students came to understand that these are acceptable and valid subjects to talk about.

The third annual Manhattan SPARK Peer Helper Program conference, "Building Solutions to Violence," was an all-day event that featured presentations by students, educators, government officials, representatives of Victims Services (an agency which deals with domestic violence), and prevention professionals. Presenters offered workshops on drug use and violence, date rape, ethnic and racial violence, verbal abuse, child abuse, and positive alternatives to weapons as a means of dealing with disputes, such as conflict resolution. Among the presentations were skits performed by the SPARK Peer Players, after which the audience participated in discussions about how the situations depicted might have been "played" differently.

One of the Victims Services representatives pointed out that in cases of domestic violence or sexual abuse "everyone's a victim," and offered a taxonomy of victimization--"primary victims," "secondary victims," and "vicarious victims."

PERCEPTIONS OF SPARK STAFF

Peer Helper Training Manual

Most SPARK staff members considered the Peer Helper Training Manual useful but limited. Most reported using it more as a resource than as a comprehensive curriculum guide, although a few individuals relied on it substantially. One prevention specialist said, "I use the manual structure, but the material I get myself...some of it is outdated." The peer facilitator on the same SPARK team commented, "We still don't have Part 2. We use it as a frame of reference, like a cookbook." Another peer facilitator discarded some of the lessons, but found the ideas underlying them useful.

Students' Skills and Knowledge

According to the SPARK staff, the majority of students who took the one-year Peer Helper course acquired skills and knowledge that enabled them not only to help other students but to deal with their own problems more effectively. The failure of some students to develop these capabilities were generally attributed to specific aspects of their temperament or personality (e.g., shyness, impatience, competitiveness) and social values (e.g., "machismo," "moralism") that made them unsuited for the role of peer helper.

Relationship to the School Community

Most of the SPARK staff interviewed tended to speak about SPARK and the Peer Helper Program interchangeably. When asked how they thought the Peer Helper Program was regarded by

On the other hand, several team members noted that not all school staff as yet recognized the program's potential. As one intervention specialist observed, "You have to keep reminding the teachers: 'You can refer kids to us.'" Similarly, one peer facilitator believed that guidance counselors were generally supportive of peer counseling (noting that they don't have the time to talk with every student except in crisis situations), but that others, while not opposed to it, did not view it as important. This respondent was, nevertheless, optimistic, adding, "You don't change that [others' perceptions] in two years."

PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AND GUIDANCE STAFF

The eight administrators and guidance staff who were interviewed, like the SPARK staff, tended to speak of SPARK and the Peer Helper Program interchangeably. They regarded SPARK favorably, and while they also viewed the Peer Helper Program positively in theory, most expressed reservations about adolescents being given what one administrator called "the moral authority to counsel other kids." This comment reflected what is apparently a common misunderstanding on the part of school staff and students who are not directly involved in the program about the role of the student peer helpers, as well as the staff's reluctance to acknowledge that adolescents do in fact often rely on their peers--title or not--for information and support.

PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATING STUDENTS

More than half of the 47 students who were interviewed were

young women, as were the majority of peer helpers in each of the six schools. As described by themselves and others, these students tended to be more articulate, sociable, responsible, and mature than their peers. They were not simply popular; their friends and classmates related to them as leaders, and they identified themselves as such. Many of them viewed the Peer Helper Program as a way of helping them become more effective in that role. As one graduating senior said, "All of my friends come to me. I wanted to make sure I was helping them properly."

One student viewed the program as a way of exploring a possible career goal: "I want to do psychology or social work. I'm here to see if this is really what I want to do."

Most students said that they had acquired skills and knowledge that not only enabled them to be better helpers, but equipped them to handle their own lives more competently. "The training has helped my relationship with my parents," said a junior who described his family life before he became involved in the program as "tense." "There was no major problem," he added, "I just couldn't get along with them. I've learned how to talk to them so we can hear what each other is saying. I can look at things from their point of view now--even if I still don't agree!" Explaining how the training had affected dealings with other people, another student said, "I've learned to be patient, to listen, and not to give advice."

While many of the students emphasized the value of the training in improving interpersonal skills, several mentioned

that they had found the information they acquired--particularly about the resources that are available for helping adolescents with problems related to abuse and sexuality--"much more" useful. A large proportion of these students decided to become peer helpers after they themselves had received help through the program:

- "I don't know how long I would have stayed in the school if not for SPARK. The guidance office is so formal. I have friends who went to SPARK and that was enough."
- "I was helped out by a peer helper. My problems were very small and insignificant, but I couldn't handle them by myself. I've had different people take an interest in me. It changed my life."
- "I came here two years ago [from Korea]. I didn't know anything...I didn't know how to read. This program helps people."

One student expressed dissatisfaction with the nature of the peer helper role in his school: "I have a cousin [in the Peer Helper Program] at another school who got involved in a clothing drive for poor people. I'd much rather do something like that. I think it's boring to sit around and talk about your feelings all the time."

PERCEPTIONS OF OTHER STUDENTS

Forty students responded to questions about the Peer Helper Program during brief, informal interviews conducted individually and in small groups of friends and classmates. The questions probed their familiarity with the program, and their perceptions of its usefulness based on their own or their friends' experiences with it.

Although all of the students interviewed in each of the six schools had been introduced to SPARK and the Peer Helper program, seven of them said that they had never heard of them. Only four of these students said that they or friends of theirs had sought help through the program. This is not surprising since a very small percentage of the school population, overall, typically came to the SPARK office for help; it is also possible that those who have sought such assistance might not want others to know they had a problem. For the most part, however, the experiences of those students who were familiar with the program were positive. Some illustrative comments:

- "I went to a SPARK Peer Helper workshop on stress at the beginning of the year. My friend dragged me there. It amazed me that other people have the same problems as me. I learned a lot from just that one workshop. I had never thought of myself as being troubled by stress. I thought it was natural to feel that way."

- "I was shy. I couldn't talk in a group. It helped me to open up. It's a lot different with someone your own age."

- "If a teacher thinks something is wrong, they'll put you on the path to SPARK. It's up to you if you want to go. My girlfriend went because she didn't know what else to do. It was a situation with her father, and she felt she couldn't talk to anyone she knew about it. The girl she talked to used to be in the same situation. She could understand what my friend was dealing with."

However, one student was dissatisfied with the program. "I went," he said, "and I didn't get help. The kid I talked to was just trying to show off. He did all the talking."

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the implementation of the Peer Helper Program varied in the six schools that participated in it during the 1993-94 school year--e.g., schools differed in the criteria they used in selecting the student helpers, the ways in which they defined the students' roles, and in their perception of SPARK's relationship to other student support services--the perceptions of those involved with it were positive, overall.

Both program staff and the peer helpers reported improvement in participating students' communication skills, increased knowledge about issues related to substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, sexual and other forms of abuse and violence, and heightened familiarity with school and community resources providing assistance with such problems.

Although the Peer Helper Program lacked high visibility among students, overall, those who were familiar with it--either because of their own experience or that of their friends--tended to view it favorably. However, those who benefited the most, appeared to be the peer helpers themselves, a finding which is consistent with other studies on peer counseling/ helping.

Administrators and guidance counselors were generally supportive of the program and viewed it as a resource, although some school staff needed to be reminded of the role it could play in helping students.

The Peer Helper Training Manual was generally regarded as useful, although most users considered it limited--i.e., outdated and not sufficiently advanced.

Based on the findings presented here and elsewhere in this report, the following recommendations are offered:

- There is a need to increase the program's visibility among both students who might avail themselves of its services, and school staff who may not recognize the unique opportunities for help it provides; staff also need to be better informed about the nature of the program and how it differs from other SPARK services, and receive assurances that peer helpers do not provide inappropriate assistance to other students. Currently, the SPARK Staff Development Unit has prepared modules that can be delivered by peer facilitators, and other SPARK staff at school sites, to better explain program services.

- Since the role of helping clearly affords students important opportunities for personal growth and development, this program targets as peer helpers students who demonstrate good interpersonal skills and responsible behaviors because it expands services to other students who are at-risk. The identification of such at-risk students for the purpose of bringing them into contact with SPARK personnel and other services is important and perhaps this notion needs to be more clearly defined for some school staff.

- Since students who use program services typically seek help with everyday problems encountered at home and at school, training for the peer helpers should equip them to deal with such "lower profile", but to adolescents obviously important, issues.

- The Peer Helper Training Manual, Volume I, currently used by staff, is a draft copy which was field tested and reviewed by a committee of volunteer peer facilitators and revised and rewritten by the coordinator of the Peer Helper Program. The new material contains more up-to-date and demonstrated approaches to adolescent issues about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; issues of personal growth and development; personal health; and violence prevention. This new volume should be implemented as soon as possible.

- The program at six sites was discontinued for reasons ranging from staff resignation and reassignment to lack of support from the principal for a programmed course for credit. Program staff need to examine the issues that precluded the program's continued implementation in six high schools during the 1993-94 school year, and reevaluate the criteria used for selecting schools or ways of helping schools deal with factors that impede the program's implementation.